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# Embracing *Duality*

*In a long-awaited exhibition of new and recent works, Brett Bigbee explores a path toward freedom as a visual storyteller.*

BY JOHN O'HERN

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*Man, No Man*, 2023, oil  
on wood panel, 9 x 12"

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*Heritage*, 2018, oil on  
linen stretched over  
wood panel, 10½ x 8¾"

I first saw Brett Bigbee's work in the late 80s in the vault of the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine, on a tour with the museum's then executive director, Chris Crosman. Chris would later be the founding chief curator of

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. The exquisitely-painted illusionistic self-portrait took my breath away. A few years later I was able to acquire another extraordinary self-portrait for the contemporary collection of the Arnot Art Museum in Elmira, New York, where I was executive director and curator.

Over the years I got to know Brett and his wife Ann Binder, and their boys Joe and James, all of whom were perfect models for Brett's paintings. His soulful portraits of his family and nature came after long periods of observation and contemplation, and even longer periods of execution.

"In the past, my paintings took years to complete," he says. "I sought to create works that required exactitude and adhered to the disciplines devised by artists throughout history. These works are contemplative and bring great meaning to me. However, my life did not follow a predictable path, and my new paintings started to reflect my internal and external conflicts. As a result, where I once almost froze each moment in silence,







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Sanctuary, 2023, oil on linen  
stretched over wood panel, 8 x 10"

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In the Land of Prizm, 2023, oil on  
linen stretched over wood panel,  
7 x 10"

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I'm Not a Cat, 2022, oil on linen,  
14¾ x 9½"

I began to reveal the forces that shape us all. So here in these first paintings, I explore a path toward freedom as a visual storyteller."

His new paintings, from 2018 through 2023, are being shown at Alexandre Gallery in New York through December 22. The name of the exhibition, *Small Realities*, refers to the 15 diminutive paintings that comprise it and the universal insights they illustrate.

I hadn't seen Brett for many years, nor his work. The paintings in *Small Realities* stopped me in my tracks. They weren't what I expected but they are still Brett. I thought, "He's found his inner child."

In her exhibition essay, Suzette McAvoy, curator at the Farnsworth when I visited and later executive director and chief curator at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland, quotes Brett on a visit to his studio, "What I was looking for in my work was maturity. There's the Picasso quote, 'It takes a long time to become young.'"

On a Fulbright to Italy, Brett met the artist Carter Zervas (1951-2004). In her





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essay, Suzette writes about a catalog of Zervas's work, "The saint (or the devil) resides in each of us and can reveal itself not just at the fulcrum of victory or sacrifice but at any step along the way,' writes Douglass Paschal in the catalog's foreword. It is this quality, above others, that Bigbee's work shares with Zervas. The embrace of the devil and the saint, the openness to the whole of life."

In *Man, No Man*, 2023, St. George, astride his pure white horse, pierces the throat of the purple dragon with his lance. He slays the dragon, takes the maiden, is later martyred by the Emperor Diocletian and then declared a saint. "Why is he a saint for killing a miraculous creature?" Brett asks. "In modern Western thought, if you discover parts of yourself that are evil, you can kill them by force of intellect. In Eastern thought, you are what you are. You find the noble parts of the true self. In the painting the dragon is grinning. If you force the evil into hiding it becomes more powerful. We are the dragon, the knight and the horse."



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I had considered dragons as genderless until I saw its testicles in *Man, No Man*, opening another avenue of thought that will take time to get through.

The internal and external struggles of *Man, No Man* take place in a field of beautiful, ephemeral, living things—ephemeral, but perennial. In *Sanctuary*, 2023, Brett probes the physical depths of nature rather than the depths of the psyche. The place that was an asphalt parking area when I visited him years ago, is now a place where nature flourishes—some plantings and many volunteers. “This earth is worth reverence,” he says. “I’m painting plants that grow in a wasteland that are part of life even when we try to stamp it out by poisoning it. Let the grasses grow and they turn to seed that birds come to feed on and bring seeds of other plants.”

He had done a series of paintings of ground covers but in *Sanctuary* he wanted to “see into a place of peace, of richness. How can I see space?” As he contemplated the question he painted other paintings. “There were 1,000 ways to finish but I didn’t know any of them.” He settled on an unexpected cobalt blue to create the dramatic depth.

Allegories abound in this new work. In *Heritage*, 2018, the deftly modeled figures of his illusionistic

work become flatter and depth gives way to pattern. Eve, from the Middle Eastern story of creation listens intently to an Asian serpent as she holds a fruit in her hand. Her response to the serpent’s whispers reverberates in the minds of many today.

*Wanting Nothing*, 2022, another exploration of what lies almost under foot, reminds me of the sermon on the mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus says to the multitude, “Consider the lilies of the field how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin...” They simply are, as we, Eve, the dragon and St. George are.

Brett is exploring the magic of all that is. He says, “I think I see things that are important, that are overlooked. There are things I want to say speaking in this ancient language. I’ve only touched the surface. Think of Chagall. He could make people fly.” ●

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*Vixen with Bird*, 2018, oil on linen stretched over wood panel, 8 x 10"

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*Orbit of Intimacy*, 2021, oil on linen stretched over wood panel, 8 x 10"

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*Wanting Nothing*, 2022, oil on linen stretched over wood panel, 16 x 12"

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*Dogfish*, 2020, oil on Masonite, 7 x 5"

## SMALL REALITIES

**When:** Through December 22, 2024

**Where:** Alexandre Gallery

25 E. 73<sup>rd</sup> Street, New York, NY 10021

**Information:** (212) 755-2828, [www.alexandregallery.com](http://www.alexandregallery.com)